

Green thoughts inspired by Stockholm and Rio

How far has the world come in creating awareness of the environment?

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IN 1972, the United Nations convened the historic Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm, Sweden. Twenty years later, the UN Conference on Environment and Development, also known as the Earth Summit, was held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.

Next week, from June 20 to June 22, the UN will hold its third conference on the environment, the UN Conference on Sustainable Development, also known as Rio+20, again in Rio de Janeiro.

In March 1990, the UN elected me to chair the preparatory committee for the Earth Summit. At the Summit, the conference elected me to chair the main committee, its principal negotiating forum.

The following were the summit's achievements:

- Rio Declaration on Environment and Development;
- Agenda 21, containing an ambitious 470-pages-long programmes of action for sustainable development in the 21st century;
- Non-legally-binding authoritative statement of Principles on Forests;
- Agreement to negotiate a new treaty to combat desertification;
- The opening for signature of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, which had been negotiated on a separate track;
- The opening for signature of the UN Convention on Biological Diversity, which had also been negotiated on a separate track.
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Twenty years have passed since the Earth Summit. Has the world made progress or regressed during this period? On the positive side, we can point to the fact that all 193 member states of the UN have either a ministry for the environment or an environmental protection agency.

The environment movement has grown stronger. It has influenced, in positive ways, the behaviour of individuals, business and governments.

However, the positives are outweighed by the negatives. The following are the principal problem areas:

- The emission of greenhouse gases has continued to increase and we are no longer sure whether the goal to cap the rise of global temperature to 2 deg C is doable.
- The Kyoto Protocol will expire at the end of this year and it is uncertain whether the developed countries would be willing to agree to a second commitment period (Australia and Japan have said that they would not, Canada has withdrawn from the Protocol and the US is not a party to it).
- It is also not clear whether the agreement in Durban to negotiate a post-2020 agreement, applicable to all countries, will succeed.
- The world's rainforests, including those in Indonesia and East Malaysia, are rapidly disappearing, due to illegal logging and unsustainable forestry management.

- The world is losing its biological diversity at a rate which is 1,000 times faster than the natural rate of extinction.
- In the past 50 years, we have lost 20 per cent of the land suitable for agriculture, 90 per cent of our large commercial fisheries, and 33 per cent of our forests, leading to the loss of ecosystems.
- The oceans, which absorb 30 per cent of the carbon dioxide from the atmosphere and provide the largest source of protein to human beings, are threatened by acidification, rising temperature and over-exploitation.

Singapore's achievements

UNLIKE the dismal global picture, the last 20 years have been a period of progress for Singapore. I count the following as some of Singapore's most important achievements:

- 47 per cent of Singapore's total land area is covered by greenery;
- The gazettement of two new nature reserves at Sungei Buloh and Labrador;
- Saving the tidal flat at Chek Jawa from reclamation;
- Saving the trees of the Lower Peirce Reservoir from being cut down to make way for a golf course;
- The building of new parks and an islandwide park connector;
- The building of the Marina Barrage and turning Marina Bay and the Kallang Basin into a reservoir;
- Opening our reservoirs for recreational use and bringing nature back to our rivers, streams and canals;
- Highlighting the role of cities in the conservation of biodiversity, culminating in the adoption of the Singapore Cities Biodiversity Index by the Nagoya Conference last year;
- Fostering the growth of a water industry and being a global thought leader of water policy and governance;
- Championing the movement of liveable cities and being a global thought leader on good urban planning, policies and solutions;
- Encouraging the trend to build green buildings and to retrofit old buildings to become green buildings;
- Launching multi-disciplinary environmental education, both at the undergraduate and post-graduate levels and at the Asia Pacific Centre for Environmental Law of the National University of Singapore;
- Saving endangered species of animals such as the banded-leaf monkey, welcoming the return of the hornbill and rediscovering other species that were thought to have disappeared from Singapore;
- Fostering a cooperative partnership between government, business and civil society;
- Building a new museum of natural history.

My wish list

SINGAPORE has done well, but we should not rest on our laurels. We should continue to forge ahead. The following is my wish list.

First, I think the time has come for Singapore to enact a law on environmental impact assessment (EIA). Having been intimately involved in a legal dispute involving our land reclamation activities in the Strait of Johor, I know that we do, in fact, carry out such an assessment. The result is, however, not made public and there is no consultation with interested stakeholders. Our neighbour, Malaysia, has shown that having an EIA law need not result in inordinate delay.

At its best, the EIA will lead to a better decision, and the people will feel that their views have been taken into consideration in arriving at that decision.

Second, I would urge the authorities to consider designating our first marine nature reserve. We need such a reserve, with adequate protection measures for marine life, in order to ensure the conservation of genetic diversity. Although Singapore has one of the world's biggest and busiest ports, we have 270 species of hard corals and 111 species of reef fishes in our waters.

A marine nature reserve will ensure the survival of this natural heritage. It will also be a great selling point and indicate our serious commitment to protect the marine environment to the world. The two potential areas are Pulau Hantu and Pulau Semakau.

Third, I would request our authorities consider raising the bar on the recycling of waste. We should, where feasible, encourage the recycling of waste, such as paper, plastic, aluminium cans and glass bottles. The situation at present is not satisfactory.

We should also consider the feasibility of emulating Japan, South Korea and Taiwan by enacting a law, and to start by requiring industrial and commercial establishments, as well as hotels and foodcourts, to separate food waste from other kinds of waste at source. The food waste, when treated by anaerobic digestion, will produce biogas which can, in turn, be used to generate renewable electricity.

We had such a plant in Singapore which, unfortunately, failed because, in the absence of a law requiring the segregation of waste, it could not get enough uncontaminated food waste for treatment. This is a pity because if it had succeeded, it was scaleable and had tremendous potential in Asia as food waste is a major source of leachate contamination of ground water and a contributor to greenhouse gas emissions.

Fourth, in our quest to reduce our carbon footprint, energy efficiency is a low-hanging fruit. The efficient use and the conservation of energy are, however, achievable only with the cooperation and help of business and the people.

Let me cite one example. Singapore has become notorious for its abuse of air-conditioning. I remember the former dean of Insead Antonio Borges telling me, during his first visit to Singapore, that he had discovered Singapore actually had two seasons: summer outdoors and winter indoors.

The gentle and humorous advertisements on television by the National Environment Agency (NEA), exhorting Singaporeans to use air-conditioning more responsibly, have not worked. I would urge the NEA and Singapore Environment Council to wage a more energetic campaign targeting our educational institutions, hospitals, movie theatres, hotels, restaurants and clubs.

The writer is Ambassador-at-Large of Singapore.

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